

In news

Agencies remain deadlocked on Bootheel floodway project

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WASHINGTON - Missouri officials are on the hot seat as they weigh the fate of an \$85 million flood control project in the Bootheel that ranks as one of the Army Corps of Engineers' most controversial projects in the nation.

The Department of Natural Resources has until Monday to decide whether to certify the long-sought St. Johns Bayou-New Madrid Floodway project, designed to protect against periodic flooding that plagues East Prairie, Mo., and nearby communities.

But the flood protection comes with enough environmental costs to have mired down the project for years at the highest levels of the federal government

Now, after design improvements, the last hurdle is a provision under the Clean Water Act requiring states to certify that projects adhere to states' own standards for protecting wetlands and waterways.

With the deadline under federal law already extended by the corps and a decision drawing near, state resource officials are buffeted by political pressure and disagreement between federal agencies.

On Friday, in an effort to resolve an impasse, Midwestern officials from the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were summoned to Jefferson City in hopes of nailing down a solution. But there was no resolution to conflicts that have prevented the state from signing on to the project.

"We are reviewing whether or not there are still issues here or whether the corps has satisfactorily responded to all of the concerns put on the table by Fish and Wildlife," said Ron Kucera, the resource agency's deputy director for policy.

Kucera noted that Missouri had another prime concern: protecting Big Oak Tree State Park, a 1,000-acre, cypress-covered swath of original Missouri landscape near East Prairie. Officials worry that it might become starved for water if a hole in the levee is filled.

"They have to take care of that park," he said.

Patching the levee

The corps plan calls for closing a quarter-mile gap in an earthen levee so as to lock the Mississippi River in its channel. The gap has been used over the years as a release valve to protect more populated areas elsewhere from flooding.

Construction includes two pumps that would rid the area of rainwater and a 10-foot-square steel gate designed to allow water through when necessary and, it is hoped, to permit the passage of fish into the floodway to spawn.

Despite negotiations, formal environmental assessments and high-level meetings at the Pentagon during the administration of President Bill Clinton, the Fish and Wildlife Service remains opposed to many of the plan's features, particularly damage and change to about

18,000 acres of wetlands.

The corps promises to substitute about 8,000 acres of the affected wetlands by buying low-lying farmland, planting hardwood trees and then turning the acreage over to the state for preservation.

But the Fish and Wildlife Service argues that the corps' wetlands -replacement plan is fraught with uncertainties, among them potential problems acquiring farmland made more valuable by the project.

Those worries and others were outlined in a letter Oct. 7 to the corps that asserts unambiguously how the Fish and Wildlife agency views the project. Biologists in the agency want an independent scientific review, which they suggested at the meeting Friday.

"We believe fish and wildlife resources will be significantly and negatively affected by this project," wrote Charles Scott, the Fish and Wildlife Service supervisor in Columbia, Mo.

Environmentalists also roundly criticize the project, noting that it would effectively plug the last opening between the river and its flood plain on the middle and lower Mississippi.

What's more, the conservation advocates argue, much of the benefit will be enjoyed not by communities in need of flood protection but by wealthy landowners who would be able to farm their ground easier and more predictably.

Critics have suggested a far less costly flood control plan that would build a small levee along Saint James Ditch, near East Prairie, while improving storm-water management and elevating flood-prone roads.

"No corps project in America right now destroys more habitat while providing so little benefit to taxpayers," asserted Scott Faber, a lawyer for a New York-based advocacy group, Environmental Defense.

If the Department of Natural Resources grants the water quality certification, the Corps of Engineers will begin buying land from willing sellers and then start building the project in the summer. Environmental advocates vow to sue, both on environmental grounds and for what they regard as the corps' inflated calculations of the project's benefits.

Refusal to grant the permit would intensify political infighting, which already has grown pitched with complaints from state legislators and phone calls to government agencies from the project's congressional champion, Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Cape Girardeau.

Defending the project

Emerson, re-elected this month to a fourth term, says buttonholing officials is part of her unyielding support of the project.

"There's never been a moment in my life for the past 22 years that I have not been involved in this," she said, professing a commitment to Bootheel flood control that reaches back to the tenure of her late husband, Bill Emerson, who represented the 8th District before she did.

"These aren't real wetlands; they have been farmed wetlands since the early 1900s," she said, referring to the status of about half of wetlands acreage that would be altered under the plan.

"I think they have come up with a really good plan. And at the end of the day, I think you will see that this has been a good way for the corps to work with stakeholders from an environmental standpoint."

Martha Ellen Black, who runs the Susanna Wesley Family Learning Center in East Prairie, said she was weary of what she calls conservation "wackos" and newspaper articles highlighting potential environmental damage.

"We just want to live a normal, everyday life here. Our streets and roads become flooded, ambulances can't get through and people have to be moved from nursing homes. When it floods, life stops," she said.

Corps officials contend that they have worked to improve the project, noting that the Environmental Protection Agency dropped objections after some features were redesigned.

David Reece, chief of the corps' environmental branch in the Memphis District, had this response to the Fish and Wildlife agency's October letter: "I think they are just blatantly wrong."

Reece said that besides agreeing to buy land and plant trees, the corps had agreed to more protections for shorebirds and alterations in a gate structure being built at the levee that the corps believes would allow passage of fish. He also believes the community will help arrange the land acquisition. Condemnation will not be used, he added.

"By the time we have put in all these environmental features, I personally believe that this area is going to be better off once this project is constructed," he said.

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